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Evaluation Committee Report

on

The Effectiveness of Agricultural Service Boards in Improvement Districts

Alberta Municipal Affairs

Alberta Agriculture

June, 1983

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Agricultural Service Board Act was passed in 1945 as a positive response to a resolution passed at the Municipal District Convention in 1944. "The Act provides for a co-operative and co-ordinated effort between the Department of Agriculture and municipal or improvement districts in agricultural policies and programmes which are deemed to be of mutual interest and concern."

The local Agricultural Service Board is considered to be most familiar with local needs and priorities and best able to determine where programmes and resources should be directed. Provincial legislation has been enacted to provide for enforcement to assure that responsibilities are met by the individual land owner to control weeds and pests and conserve soil. The Agricultural Fieldman, together with the Agricultural Service Board, is delegated by the Minister of Agriculture to provide enforcement under the legislation. In return, the provincial Department of Agriculture cost shares programs to accomplish the mutual objective of protecting the productive capacity of the agricultural land base of the province.

Composition of Agricultural Service Boards vary from one jurisdiction to another with a combination of elected and appointed members. Boards may change significantly each election year, particularly if appointed members also change at that time.

A change of membership can have a positive impact in generating new program ideas or in involving a new group of farmers. Change may also have a negative impact, at least initially, if new members are unclear about the objectives of an Agricultural Service Board and its programs or if new board members lack the confidence or skill to make input into program development and direction.

EVALUATION OF AGRICULTURAL SERVICE BOARDS

The Improvement Districts Operations Division of Municipal Affairs has expressed support of the Agricultural Service Board program and wish to achieve better programming in order to place a higher emphasis on the role of Improvement Districts in encouraging improved

Agricultural methods and practises, throughout the important agricultural areas they represent. In recent years there has been an increasing awareness on the part of Agricultural Service Boards, Alberta Agriculture and Alberta Municipal Affairs of the need to provide more effective services. Municipal Affairs also identified a growing concern with the applicability of specific programs and the general direction and purpose of Agricultural Service Boards in Improvement Districts.

In order to more clearly determine the present level of board effectiveness and the support that is needed as well as to clarify the purpose and define the future direction of Agricultural Service Boards, the Improvement District Operations Division of Municipal Affairs initiated a study. Staff of the Departments of Agriculture and Municipal Affairs were asked to meet with each Agricultural Service Board in the Improvement Districts of the province. Boards were invited to respond to the following questions:

1. What programs are you doing now?
2. Why are you doing them?
3. What would you like to do?
4. What needs to be done in the next five years?
5. What administrative concerns do you have which affect the operation of the Agricultural Service Board.

PROCESS

The team asked to develop an evaluation process for maximum participation by each Agricultural Service Board member, to record the suggestions of Boards for solution, and to consolidate results were:

Chuck Curr, Regional Director, Improvement Districts Operations Division, Municipal Affairs

Ferrin Leavitt, Head, Agricultural Services Branch, Agriculture

Pat Sheehan, Associate Director, Engineering and Rural Services Division, Agriculture

Pieter de Vos, Regional Director, Improvement Districts Operations Division who attended and participated in meetings in his region
as well as making input into this report.

Meetings were held with 14 I.D. Agricultural Service Boards from November 1982 to March 1983. Meetings were attended by Agricultural Service Board members, the District Agriculturist. District Home Economist, the I.D. Manager and the Agricultural Fieldman. The resource people to assist in the process were Chuck Curr, Department of Municipal Affairs and Ferrin Leavitt, Department of Agriculture. Their responsibility was to introduce the purpose and task of the meeting, to develop the climate and provide a method for open and frank discussion, to assemble the common concerns and, with input from the meeting participants, to identify action that could be considered to improve Board effectiveness.

Detailed minutes of each meeting are available from Rural Services, Department of Agriculture, Edmonton. Many of the issues that were identified are important primarily to an individual board or area or relate to individual programs. There are, however, some major concerns relative to the understanding of the program objectives, the roles of various individuals and the planning and implementation of programs that are of generally common concern. Since these are the areas which most impact on the ability of boards to operate successfully, these concerns were identified and action to correct the problems are suggested.

COMMON CONCERNS

Understanding of the Agricultural Service Board Objectives

- role of the A.S.B. is not clearly understood by the Advisory Council when appointing members
- lack of understanding by the majority of chairmen as to A.S.B. objectives, board responsibilities and functions, communication with departments involved
- appointed members unclear about A.S.B. objectives and roles
- general public unclear about A.S.B. purpose

Definition of roles and relationships is required

- role of A.S.B. unclear to new members
- I.D. managers role unclear - may take more or less responsibility for the board than is desirable
- D.A.'s need to be better informed of their role and responsibility
- confusion over the procedure to appoint and tenure of board members
- relationship of A.S.B. to Advisory Council needs clarification

Communication improvements are required

- lack of communication and understanding between A.S.B. and Advisory Council
- lack of communication with clients

Continuity, qualification, direction of the Agricultural Fieldman (Agricultural Officer) affects board operation

- past turnover in Agricultural Fieldmen, difficulty in obtaining qualified individuals relate to inequity of salaries in comparison with those paid within M.D.'s and Counties
- lack of definition and understanding of relationship between I.D. manager and A.S.B. chairmen in direction, supervision and accountability of Agricultural Fieldmen
- boards feel they need more involvement in the screening and selection of the fieldman, particularly relative to agricultural knowledge

Short term planning is limiting program effectiveness

- planning relates to budget only and is based on Department of Agriculture guidelines and previous years program
- budgets, program development and implementation require involvement of the board as well as fieldman and D.A.

- need to reinforce value of D.A., D.H.E. and Agricultural Fieldman's report at each meeting to assist in evaluation and planning.

THESE CONCERNS MAY BE SUMMARIZED IN THE FOLLOWING BROAD AREAS:

1. There is a need for better orientation of all those involved in program planning, development, implementation and budgeting relative to the objectives, responsibilities and program opportunities of the Agricultural Service Board program.

2. There is a need to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of those involved in developing and carrying out of the Agricultural Service Board program.

3. There is a need for a policy to define the process for selecting and replacing board members and selection and supervision of the Agricultural Fieldman.

4. There is a need to improve communications between the Advisory Council, Board members, government staff and clients as a means of increasing program effectiveness.

5. There is a need to improve the skills of boards and government staff in evaluating and planning programs on a longer range basis and with greater involvement of each participant.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Based on recommendations from the A.S.B.'s at the meetings, the evaluation committee would suggest the following action be considered to assist boards to correct the identified problems and become more effective.

1. To facilitate a consistent level of operation of all Improvement District A.S.B.'s, Municipal Affairs should consider the development of an operating policy to include:

a) Board Selection and Composition

- appointment for 3 years immediately following the I.D. elections
- appointments to be made from applicants responding to newspaper advertisements for A.S.B. members

- guidelines to secure broad representation of interests and/or concerns e.g. geographic, commodity or enterprise
- one member of the A.S.B. shall be an Advisory Council member but not the board chairman

b) Revised method of selecting and supervising Agricultural Fieldmen

- A.S.B. be given the opportunity to have input in establishing the screening criteria for use by the selection panel
- interview and selection panel to consist of Municipal Affairs Personnel representative, I.D. Manager, Representative of Alberta Agriculture appointed by Regional Director (not the D.A. who sits on the A.S.B.)
- day to day operations and performance - conducted by the I.D. Manager with input from the A.S.B. Chairman

c) Formalized meeting procedures

- A.S.B.'s shall meet twice yearly with the Advisory Council:
  - once to discuss needs, program direction and concerns
  - once to present the budget to the Advisory Council with the A.S.B. chairman and all members present and the I.D. Manager, D.A. and Agricultural Fieldman as resource people
  - A.S.B.'s shall determine a regular monthly meeting date to facilitate need identification, determination of priorities, development and evaluation of programs, response to emergent situations

d) Identify process for development of a local policy manual to include:

- annual program evaluation
- annual needs assessment
- annual program plan and projected five year plan

- communication system to include
  - internal communication channels
  - on-going public relations and information program for clients
  - program implementation - e.g. enforcement of Acts

2. To improve the understanding of the Agricultural Service Board program by all those involved and to develop the skills of the Board and Agricultural Fieldman in program development and implementation, Alberta Agriculture, together with Municipal Affairs, will develop a training continuum to provide the opportunity for the development of the required skills.

a) Training for new I.D. Managers and Agricultural Fieldman

i) Orientation
- content - general philosophy, objectives and goals of A.S.B. program, legislation, organization, administration and personnel policies
- resource - Regional Directors of Alberta Agriculture and Municipal Affairs, Chairman A.S.B., D.A.

ii) Follow-up - Agricultural Fieldman
- content - review legislation and specific responsibilities, specific programs, training needs assessment
- resource - Alberta Agriculture, Head Agricultural Services

b) Training for new A.S.B. members, Agricultural Fieldman, D.A. etc. to be conducted every three years as soon as possible following appointment of A.S.B. members.

- content - objectives A.S.B. program, role and responsibilities A.S.B. members, operating procedures, relationship with Advisory Council, government departments, etc., communication channels
- resource - Alberta Agriculture, Municipal Affairs

c) Training for new A.S.B. Chairman

- content - orientation of A.S.B. Act, objectives, program deadlines, funding, organizational requirements, operating procedures
  - conduct of a meeting
  - emphasis on role as spokesman for the A.S.B.
- resource - Alberta Agriculture, Municipal Affairs, other appropriate sources

d) Ongoing Board development

i) Special training in the development and weighting of screening criteria as required.

ii) Program development
  - content - program evaluation, needs assessment, goal setting and program development for the short term and 5 year projections
  - resource - Alberta Agriculture, Municipal Affairs

iii) Public Relations
  - content - why and how to develop an appropriate method of communicating board activities and programs to better meet needs of clients
  - resource - Alberta Agriculture

e) Ongoing training - Agricultural Fieldman

- to develop those technical skills needed to carry out the various requirements of the program
- to be determined by the initial training needs assessment and to be reviewed annually as part of the performance appraisal
- skills to be upgraded on a planned basis at courses made available annually by various branches and departments.

OTHER ISSUES:

There are three additional issues which the evaluation committee feel require consideration.

1. There is need to continue to pursue reclassification of the Agricultural Fieldman in I.D.'s to bring the salary level to an equivalent of that paid by Municipal Districts and Counties.

2. There is need for a better system of determining required training opportunities with consideration given to providing some courses on a regional or sub-regional basis. Development of regional training will only be feasible if there is sufficient demand to make a regional course practical. To facilitate determining the kind of needs and training demands, the evaluation committee feels there is a requirement to explore the interest in and commitment to a regional training needs identification committee. It is suggested that this committee be comprised of:

(a) 2 A.S.B. Chairmen - selected by the regional A.S.B. Conference representing the Improvement Districts, Municipal Districts or Counties
(b) Alberta Agriculture - provincial appointment by Rural Services
(c) Regional Director - Alberta Association of Agricultural Fieldmen
(d) Alberta Agriculture - Regional appointment by the Regional Director

Results of this committee's findings would be channeled through Alberta Agriculture, Rural Services for negotiation with resource people offering courses.

3. From time to time there are suggestions that Agricultural Service Boards in Improvement Districts should be administered by Alberta Agriculture since their focus relates to agricultural activities. This would appear to arise when Boards feel the I.D. manager or I.D. Advisory Council lack commitment to the objectives of the A.S.B. program and a perception that administration by Alberta Agriculture would result in a more "sympathetic" hearing.

We feel it is crucial to maintain administration of the Agricultural Service Board and its programs at the local level with those responsible for the administration of local funds. This maintains commitment to funding the required programs and prevents the possibility of undue pressure from representatives of Alberta Agriculture to place provincial priorities ahead of perceived local needs. We feel the more appropriate solution to this problem is to provide sufficient orientation to the I.D. Manager and I.D. Advisory Council to develop an understanding of, and commitment to, Agricultural Service Board programs.

In summary, the evaluation committee was impressed with the enthusiasm and commitment of board members when given an opportunity to express their concerns and suggest solutions. We expect they would support a program to increase their understanding of Agricultural Service Board functions and programs and in developing those skills necessary to be more effective as board members.

The major constraint will be the availability of staff with an understanding of the functions and programs of Agricultural Service Boards and the necessary skills in working with groups to transfer the knowledge in a meaningful way.

Respectfully submitted:

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